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A Swath of Poppies

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There was a basketball mural in the cafeteria, the restaurant in town served grits with runny eggs, and Yvonne taught me how to drive her pick-up truck down rural Alabama dirt roads. She was a woman on whose lap I gladly sat, window down, her feet at the pedals. Out in the field was the still my father built—a giant steel machine with blue breath that ate corn from the fields and transformed it into tractor gas. My tennis shoes had treads that made the earth's red dirt into Mickey Mouse heads, and I had a red horn on my bike that was a Christmas or birthday gift, and a Ranger Rick magazine that made me dream of animals, especially raccoons and deer and mink, and also of lobster crate races and snow sculptures. The winner of the lobster crate race was a girl with quick feet, who weighed little to nothing and seemed to fly over the water, barely sinking each crate. I wanted to be her. The children I played with didn't know what snow was. When I showed them my Ranger Rick magazine, they wanted to study the snow sculptures whereas I, who was from the North, wanted to look again at the lobster crate race. There is a photograph of me with these children from that time and place in which I stand out as the one with white skin wearing a T-shirt that says, "I'm Me, Terrific, Adorable, Intelligent," my hair parted by barrettes.

Candide's cheeks are perfectly round; her eyes glitter. She has the most infectious grin. She wears corn-rowed braids and an oversized T-shirt. Initially Candide was a child of my imagination. I got her mixed up with my own self as a child. We were the same because we wore the same shirt. It was not the exact same shirt, but the one she wore in a photograph I saw of her was so similar to one I had worn at her age that I mixed us up. Her shirt read: "A Fully Fashionable Girl Comin' Downtown." Last year, on my way to Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, to visit Candide, I flew over Nigeria and looked down on the lush land where my parents met so many years ago and where my mother watched my father chase her lob across a clay tennis court and split open his head on a corner post. That evening no one was at the hospital. By the time a nurse appeared, my father's T-shirt was soaked with his own blood. The nurse searched for anesthesia. Unable to find any, she brought the lamp closer and sewed my father up without it.

When I was a child, whenever my parents and I returned home (after a day away, and after trudging through snow, our house still and dark in the distance), my mother would search in the dark for matches on the mantle and then sit at the dark table, taking the lamps' globes off, rolling up wicks and lighting them, and then carefully returning the globes to their mounts. The lamps seemed to swell as they turned blue. Sometimes the globes were smudged with soot. Mostly they were yellow where the flames licked them. It was my mother's job to light the lamps, my father's job to bring the wood in, stoke the stove, use the poker to move around any last dying piece of coal, and my job to crumple

the newspaper up into balls. These were the firings of our house in the woods. This was coming home. It took some time for our presence to be made live, for our house to start breathing again. We clunked it back to life, we coaxed it. It groaned, sputtered, and sometimes it balked. We were cold. We needed it. It became itself a small fire. It opened itself to us gradually and glowed.

Candide, I said softly. I recognized her immediately. Her face was more ashen and she was smaller, somehow, than the photos had rendered her. Her braided hair was yellow-colored, a sign of malnutrition. She sat outside, near the orphanage office, in a plastic chair. She's upset, the orphanage director said, from something that happened at school. What happened? I asked. Fils spoke to Candide in Lingala. I heard Candide say something in a very quiet voice. She was yelled at, Fils translated. An older woman came over and wiped Candide's nose with a hanky. Someone else brought me a chair. I sat down next to Candide and took out the pad I had brought for her and then began drawing her portrait. It was the only thing I knew to do. She was looking down, and I drew her this way using a blue colored pencil. A few moments passed. Candide didn't move. When I finished, I held the page up to show her. She grinned. Then she bowed her head, squeezing tears out of her eyes, still smiling. Man, that girl can smile, Fils said.

My father once called me out of the house to see a poppy bloom—its petals so delicate, like a tissue that had been balled. We watched the wrinkled red baby's fist unfurl in silence. It was early summer and the morning was not cool, not hot. My father was somewhat bent over; he did not yet use both walking sticks he later carved that now rest against the bookshelf. Each spring my father built trellises for his poppies wherever the previous year's seed pods had fallen. The trellises were vertical saplings he wired together, three feet high or so, tall enough to enclose and support the long poppy stalks that otherwise were rarely strong enough to uphold their own heavy heads and collapsed in high winds. One summer, my father drove me along Lakeshore Road to show me a field of poppies a neighbor had managed to grow. We later heard this man had first dumped a ton of pesticide in the soil. Before we knew this, we had wanted to sow flowers like that: a swath of color in a field.

After my father died, after his skin pulled taut over him, after he shrank, after his bones jutted out of his skin, after he was already gone before going, after I had to watch him unable to eat, unable to take a sip without choking, unable to cough without crying out, and after my mother had given him his liquid morphine, rubbing his cheek, his breath slowing (morphine, he told me, let him sleep "in a straight line"), the hospice nurse was called to the house. It was 4 a.m. The nurse had no sense that we—my mother who doesn't cry, and me who cries too much—did not want her bosomy hugs. Nor did we want the indignity of her ordering us, first thing, to get my father's morphine and some coffee grounds. Had we understood what was going on, we would have poured the drugs into the wood cook stove—it was on. Instead we retrieved for her the things she wanted: a plastic container, a plastic spoon, the coffee grounds, and then sat with her at our walnut table, the one my father crafted, while she stirred the white pills and clear liquid into the plastic container full of still-hot grounds. After she finished stirring, she broke the plastic spoon in half, wincing, and added the broken spoon to the mixture. As I duct taped the container shut as per her instructions, I thought of the people who had

worked so hard to supply us with those drugs, people who had moved their families to the fields, built huts near the poppies, scored the ovaries of the flower pods two weeks after the petals dropped, and then collected the cuts' drips; people who knew the delicate flower's crown had to tilt skyward before they could score it—and only then come late afternoon, so that the white latex would flow without drying too quickly in the sun and clogging the cut. These farmers know that opium darkens and thickens on cool nights, like the blood did on my father's gums. An hour before he died, his gums turned black, and while my mother stoked the woodstove, I moistened his thin lips with lemon water.

Candide lined the things I brought for her up in her lap. Yoyo, Candide's best friend, tied the gaping hole in the plastic bag up in a knot. Candide then put her pad and colored pencils in it. Madness is a type of living, a vulnerable band that, when stretched too far, refuses to retract, constrict—refuses its labor; a mirror reflecting the mark of society's gaze, rendering a woman unwhole who is without child. The power of a photograph, of a series of phone calls, of entertaining and then believing oneself to be a mother and then not becoming one is none other than a miscarriage. Yet Candide is alive. I once chose her from among all the orphans of the world to mother, back before anyone knew she carries the virus that killed all three of her siblings and her parents. She smiled at me during dinner in a way a child had never before smiled at me. I smiled back. The sun got more brilliant. And then night fell. Candles were lit along roadside stands and men rode on the tailgate of trucks.

Adoptions have closed for good in the DRC. I've had to leave Candide where she is. Now it is so hot in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, that the watercress leaves point downward. The family living on the porch below, young parents and their two-year-old, use the downstairs washer. The smell of their laundry soap invades my apartment. There is something about what happens in heat that magnifies bewilderment. I place notes on the washing machine after buying natural soap, begging them to use it. But the young mother tells me she won't wash her clothes in that. Whatever, I say, as I exit the porch. I have to get away. She says, We'll only be here a week. She has said this since the beginning of the summer. If you're going to have an attitude about it, she adds. I cry on the way to the grocery store because I have wanted one thing and one thing only, a child, for so long now and have worked so hard to adopt that the rest of my life has shriveled.

In a stuccoed, low-ceilinged room, Candide gets ready for school. She buttons her white blouse and ties her shoelaces into a series of crocheted knots. She is ten years old and thin as a stalk of sorghum. I have lived with her light and shadow for years. She is my other half. Soon she will walk up a dusty road along which women in dirt courtyards wash their clothes and sheets, sort grain, and scrub dishes in plastic tubs. The wind this morning stirs the palm fronds. A man pulls a dug-out from the Congo River. Mammoth logs swallow the river's sandy shore as cranes lift them into train cars.

I can't sleep. I am remembering my father on a lobster boat in Greece. It's my birthday. I'm ten. I'm in the sand by Fofo's guesthouse near the baby chicks. I'm wearing my green corduroy overalls with the straps that cross in back. My hair is the length it is now—shoulder-length, brown. My skin is brown from the sun. I walk across the beach.

There is seaweed everywhere. I've cut my heel. We can't ride our bikes. I am strong enough for hundred-mile days, but I'm happy I'm hurt. I want to stay here with Fofo and the chicks. At a tavern in town, my parents gift me a goat bell. It is my heart. It is the perfect gift, the perfect object. I will never love anything as much. My father writes me a poem and draws little pictures around it. I am his flat-footed, goat-eyed girl. I want to be his flat-footed, goat-eyed girl forever.

I keep my father's copy of *Immortal Poems* by the window. I chose it, of all his possessions, and the hoodie I gave him that he never wore but that I dressed him in the day before he died. Some days I zip myself in. Some days I'm him.

He comes to me as I cut bread. I see him at the stone counter in Essex, New York, folding dough out on the counter, flour everywhere. I see his expression; he's concentrating on the bread, doing things quickly. He has it down. He has his bread towel. He has his bowl. He has his French Oven. He would almost seem angry pounding that bread. On the floor by my bed: a stone-headed bird with a wire body—a sculpture my father made me. I look at its fossil eye, its twisted wire and gold-soldered body. In it, I can see my father's quickness of touch, the way he always went after everything physically.

I eat coconut cake and drink a black tea, remembering the cremation smoke in Kathmandu and the trickle of a river. Long ago, I crossed that river. I remember bicycling through the human smoke. It felt right. Death was part of life. There was a real feeling that to pass through that smoke was to make a journey from one place to another. At the top of the hill was the monkey temple. The monkeys had taken it over as their swinging gym. The city on the other side of the river was filled with grit, the chaos of cars. But on this side of the river, there were rats, monkeys, and girls with dolls. It was such a shock to be 17 in that place. A year later, I recall writing in my notebook one morning in New York City about how death was largely hidden in this nation, how I had forgotten my childhood in the forest and been separated from everything that had ever meant something to me and been forced out into the world. I wrote this, even though I had been rearing to go, had left home at 15, not looked back, been too eager.

Airports are shutting down in Guinea, Sierra Leone, Nigeria. Sick persons arrive in Atlanta, Madrid, New Mexico. Soon we will all wear suits. It will be unsafe to engage in sex. We will die out in mad dashes. These are my thoughts before I censor them. Before the traffic erases them. Before the dog must be walked, and, so, the everyday becomes the norm. It is the abiding fact that love exists, but that there is nobody near. I was alive once. There were tastes of the inevitable, and there were tastes that were extreme. There was the thought that I would find love. And there was the idea that perhaps there was a meeting place between spirits, a mountain ledge at which souls exchanged some kind of beating. Then they stood up, bowed, and repeated the disturbance. Now there is no such knowledge.

There are cross-wirings. The way a computer can drop a signal. The way a man can come, test for something, find nothing wrong, but there still be a problem. This is the code word for lost. Outside, beyond these crumbling walls, people die. Then there are desk killers, like me, who know what is happening, who protest inside their souls, loving in secret. I think of those days I spoke to someone, who may have loved me, of my

mother who never felt herself loved enough. Was I speaking to this person of realizing myself, of choosing this realization over a not-great-enough love? If I didn't speak exactly of this, this is what I meant. Perhaps I thought that this man could understand, but why did I think this?

Tears come knowing how close we are and how far apart we must remain. Mostly, I think of my father. Then I think of a girl half a world away. Feel things, someone says. When you feel things, problems resolve on their own. I don't believe this. This evening there is another domestic dispute outside. I do not know that I can take another. Years of living beside such violence. Years of stomaching my own brokenness. Now, when a man screams, I hope you fucking die, I know that no one should wish this upon any other. All I see is my father's bloody mouth, his stiffened body being carried away in the rain.

In the winter igloos used to grow attached to the outside of our house. My father and I shoveled, packed, and shaped the blocks of snow-ice, piling them up against the thick wall of stone. This was the wall I kicked my soccer ball against. I knew the stones, their yellow-pink-grey hues, how they fit together. We let the igloos melt there; we let them wet the stone. While they lasted, we sat inside them, blissful, insolated. The igloos rested, propped up against the house, flying buttresses, loose teeth, things that couldn't stand not to be attached, spaces made just for me. I basked in them and hated their impermanence. Our house itself was a stone monument I knew how to climb. A roof whose shingle I'd touched. The wood on the backside of the house turned grey in time with rot from snow and rain. The ceiling stained. Sometimes the house smoked. Sometimes it showed me mink through its pane glass windows. Mostly it felt like old clothes in cold closets and sounded like stories I buried my nose in. Once in a while we listened to something fine on the radio. There was time. Things were in harmony. Back then when my mother and father were all I wanted.

Candide in a peach-colored colored dress. I've never seen anyone so beautiful, never loved anyone so much. This is what it means to mother—to stand guard at the very handrails of what can't be guarded. Trapped by circumstance, I try to crawl on my belly past the barricade. My body becomes leaner, meaner, and I become more silent.

My father as he approached death was thin and unbearably sweet-natured. There was also the confusion and drug-altered questions and fears. He would hold onto my arm and say, Get me out of here. Or he would ask, in a horrible voice, When? He'd basically lost his voice by the end, and so the hoarseness, the hurt of his throat, all of it meant he was suffering. Many of us are deluded enough, or perhaps hopeful enough, to think that there is something better, always, around the corner, no matter which corner. My father wasn't one of these people. Maybe a month before he died, he said that this wasn't the life he had expected. As I age, it seems, the less I am able to believe in the narratives we throw around as the expected ones. They don't seem possible, probable, or even worthy. To be able to visit in the mind of another, in the body of another, to be given a piece of a person's soul and commune with it—this is both life and art. My father's body is now in a cardboard box. His ashes, my mother says, are heavy.

This morning I stopped to see the poppies. One was popping. The flower still had its hairy cap perched atop its blood red, curled up, crepe-paper-like heart. I sat down in

front of it and waited. The red of the flower pulsed. Behind it other poppies swayed. To the left were dried poppy heads filled with black seeds the size of grains of sand. The poppy's cap separated from its stalk. I stuck out a hand. I wanted to catch the cap as the petals pushed it off, but the cap hung on. A female grosbeak came to water from the rain-filled cavity in the stone beside me. Purple Russian sage colored the interior rim of the garden. Stone birds my father sculpted stood stock still. A fly alighted on my palm. Then a sweat bee joined it, its double-yellow striped abdomen waving. Lastly, a midge stopped for a brief second. I kept my palm out. The unfolding happened ever-so-slowly. My eyes focused and unfocused. The force of the opening petals thrust the cap up ever higher. I was still poised to catch it. But when the tiny, green, hairy cap fell, it tumbled out of my hand and into the grass.

Once upon a time, my father called me out to watch a poppy open.

Spring Ulmer is the author of *Benjamin's Spectacles*, winner of Kore Press's 2007 First Book Award, and a book of essays, *The Age of Virtual Reproduction*.

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